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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 YEREVAN 000240

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [KPAO](#) [PREL](#) [AM](#)  
SUBJECT: ARMENIAN OPPOSITIONISTS DEVELOP UNDERGROUND  
INFORMATION NETWORKS TO SKIRT SOE

Classified By: CDA JOSEPH PENNINGTON, REASONS 1.5(B,D)

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SUMMARY  
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11. (C) Supporters of opposition leader Levon Ter-Petrosian and others disillusioned with Armenia's post-election crackdown are engaged in a spirited technological battle with the authorities to maintain access to independent news sources in the face of the near-total media ban imposed under the March 1 State of Emergency (SOE) decree. A university instructor described to us a growing "network of resistance" that has developed ways to evade the draconian restrictions and spread "underground" news to like-minded Armenians. Although the effectiveness of the information network will be limited by Armenia's low level of internet penetration, especially outside of Yerevan, the energy with which it is being pursued reinforces our judgment that the political confrontation that erupted into violence on March 1-2 is far from over. End Summary.

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"SAMIZDAT" RETURNS TO ARMENIA  
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12. (C) During a March 9 dinner with the Charge, a university instructor who supports opposition leader and former president Levon Ter-Petrosian (LTP) described the extraordinary efforts of LTP supporters to thwart the information blockade in place since the SOE was announced on March 1. This interlocutor is well-known to emboffs, and had been completely apolitical until the final days of the pre-election campaign, when anger over his perception of the Sargsian campaign's abuses gradually converted him into an LTP enthusiast. The instructor, who said he decided to vote for LTP only on the day before the election "because of the way the Government was attacking him," has become actively engaged in disseminating banned information through a growing network that he likened to the "samizdat" movement of the Soviet era. As the evening wore on, the instructor received more than a dozen cell phone calls (each call signaled by an "Ode to Joy" ring tone, the signature piece from LTP's post-election rallies on Freedom Square) updating him on alternate servers and "work-arounds" for websites that have been blocked by Armenian authorities under the SOE. (Note: "Samizdat," which is Russian for "self-published," refers to the Soviet-era dissident technique of circulating banned manuscripts, with each recipient expected to hand-write additional copies to disseminate to sympathetic friends and

family. End Note.)

13. (C) As part of the recent crackdown, Armenian authorities have attempted to block access to all independent and opposition-leaning news sources, including on the internet. Targeted sites have include those of Radio Liberty, VOA, and selected Armenian and Russian press outlets. YouTube was also temporarily blocked after a video was posted purporting to show Armenian security forces firing toward demonstrators on the night of March 1-2, but is now once again accessible. The instructor told us that Armenian students supporting the opposition had found ways to access the banned sites by tapping into servers outside of Armenia. "For every site that is banned," he said, "we have worked out a way to get around it." He further reported that opposition supporters were "packaging" news from the banned sites in zipfiles, which are then circulated to address lists of hundreds of other sympathizers. Each recipient is then instructed to resend the information to 100 other like-minded activists.

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PAYQAR.ORG  
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14. (C) Oppositionists have also created new sites, sometimes with the help of their brethren in the diaspora, that feature extensive non-official news reports as well as information about LTP's statements and activities, and the reaction of the international community. Zhamanak.com, for example, bills itself as "an Armenian-American political diary," and presents a sophisticated layout with stories in both Armenian and English. When the authorities blocked LTP's campaign website (levonforpresident.com), his supporters established the Armenian-language alternative payqar.org, which is apparently easier to access from local computers. The banner

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of the site features a raised fist that has become the symbol of LTP's resistance, and the post-election rallying call "struggle, struggle until the end." The site includes a link to a "clandestine newspaper" with pro-opposition stories from the "alternative" media. These sites, along with a number of pro-opposition blogs that have remained accessible, are the primary sources of information for techno-savvy Armenians who oppose the regime.

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AND MORE DVDS...  
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15. (C) Distribution of DVDs, which served LTP supporters well in the hostile media environment during the election campaign, is again being used by opposition foot-soldiers as a means to evade the media blockade. The clip posted to YouTube of the events of March 1-2 has been reproduced in DVD format and is being spread by LTP supporters in Yerevan. (Comment: DVD distribution significantly widens the pool of potential viewers, as nearly 40 percent of Armenian households own DVD players, whereas internet penetration in Armenia hovers in the low teens. In Yerevan, the heart of the "resistance" movement and home to roughly half of Armenia's 3 million population, access to technology is significantly higher, meaning that many if not most residents who tilt toward the opposition have probably been exposed to oppositional information in one form or another. Armenians' social practice of maintaining close contact with relatives across large kinship networks is also a significant multiplier of information dissemination. End comment.)

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NO ONE BELIEVES THE OFFICIAL MEDIA  
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16. (C) The effect of the media blackout is further undermined by the official media's lack of credibility with the broader public. Giro Manoyan, a leading figure in the somewhat

pro-governmental Dashnaktsutyun, told CDA March 15 that "people are not stupid -- no one believes the official media." (Comment: This remark echoes the refrain we heard from protesters in Freedom Square, who characterized giving in to the authorities' alleged theft of the election as a grievous insult to Armenians' dignity. End Comment.) Manoyan criticized the authorities for their heavy-handed approach, which he likened to "Soviet times." He echoed the views of our contacts across the political spectrum that the effect of state television's propaganda campaign against the opposition is to "drive more people into the arms of LTP." During the same conversation, Manoyan took issue with an Armenian-American visitor who asserted that the authorities were solidly in control of the current situation. "I'm not so sure they will be able to prevent further problems," he said. "Their position is very fragile."

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COMMENT  
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17. (C) Most Armenians we have spoken with -- including GOAM officials and others sympathetic to the authorities, with the notable exceptions of the President and Prime Minister -- agree that the media blackout has only added to the sense of grievance that many Armenians, especially those living in the capital, feel toward their current leaders. As our discussion with the university instructor suggests, efforts by opposition supporters to find ways around that ban have galvanized the PM's opponents and given new determination and energy to their cause. This is especially true among students and young people, who are more plugged-in technologically and more likely to view access to information as a fundamental right. As has so often been the case in recent months, in trying to subdue the opposition, the authorities appear to have unwittingly broadened and strengthened the forces arrayed against them.  
PENNINGTON